NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET

Wes Craven on directing his masterwork of horror.

by Dan Scapperotti

Three years ago while on the set of SWAMP THING Wes Craven mentioned an idea he had for a new horror-suspense film, NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET. Craven has enjoyed a lengthy engagement in the field, but his track record has followed a checkered path to success. Two early films, THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT and THE HILLS HAVE EYES, became cult favorites, but other projects haven't been as successful. SWAMP THING and DEADLY BLESSING sank into theatrical obscurity and his sequel to THE HILLS HAVE EYES is still in search of a distributor. Craven, however, has hit it big with the birth of his brainchild NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET.

Several years ago Craven was sitting with FRIDAY THE 13TH—PART III director Steve Minor in a Santa Monica restaurant when the idea for the screenplay popped into his head, a result of what Craven calls the "Ah, Ha! Principle." Craven wrote a treatment for the film but it languished in a drawer until he had completed SWAMP THING, and then began the search for a producer.

The road to production was a rocky one. Bob Shaye, whose New Line Cinema was responsible for the release of THE EVIL DEAD, expressed interest in the project, but getting financial backing was tough. "It's very difficult to put together financing on an independent project," said Craven, who candidly admitted, "It didn't help that SWAMP THING wasn't a smash hit."

But funds were found and Craven was able to launch the production with a 32-day shooting schedule. Shaye, who raised the financing, became producer and had some definite ideas on changes that could be made to the script.

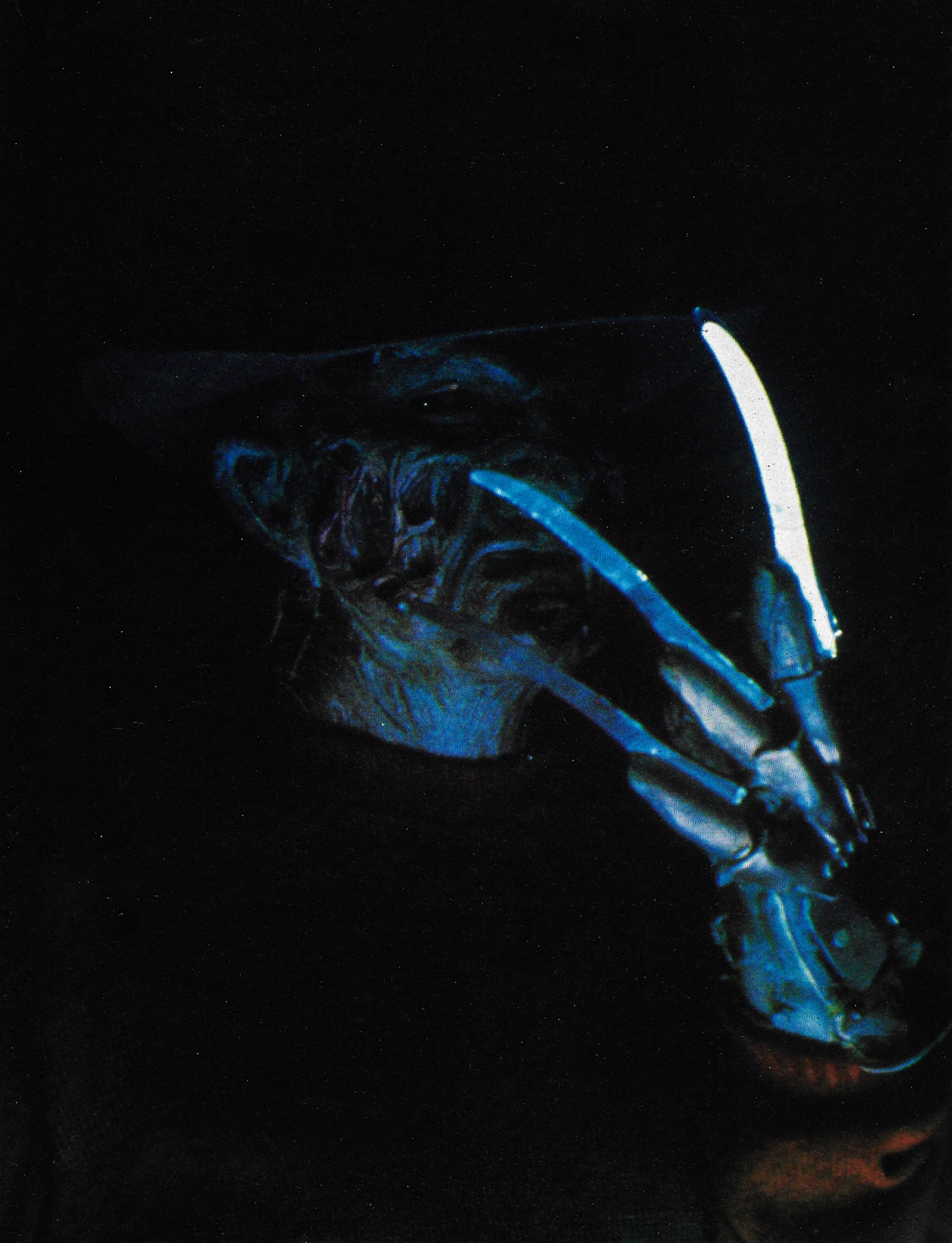
"The ending, for instance, was very much changed by ideas," said Craven. "The idea of the car roof cracking down on the kids and having that kind of added threat was his idea. He wanted to make the film a bit more complex, so that things don't end up in a neat knot." The change was meant to convey the idea that good doesn't triumph over evil nor does evil triumph over good. There is a constant ongoing battle between the two.

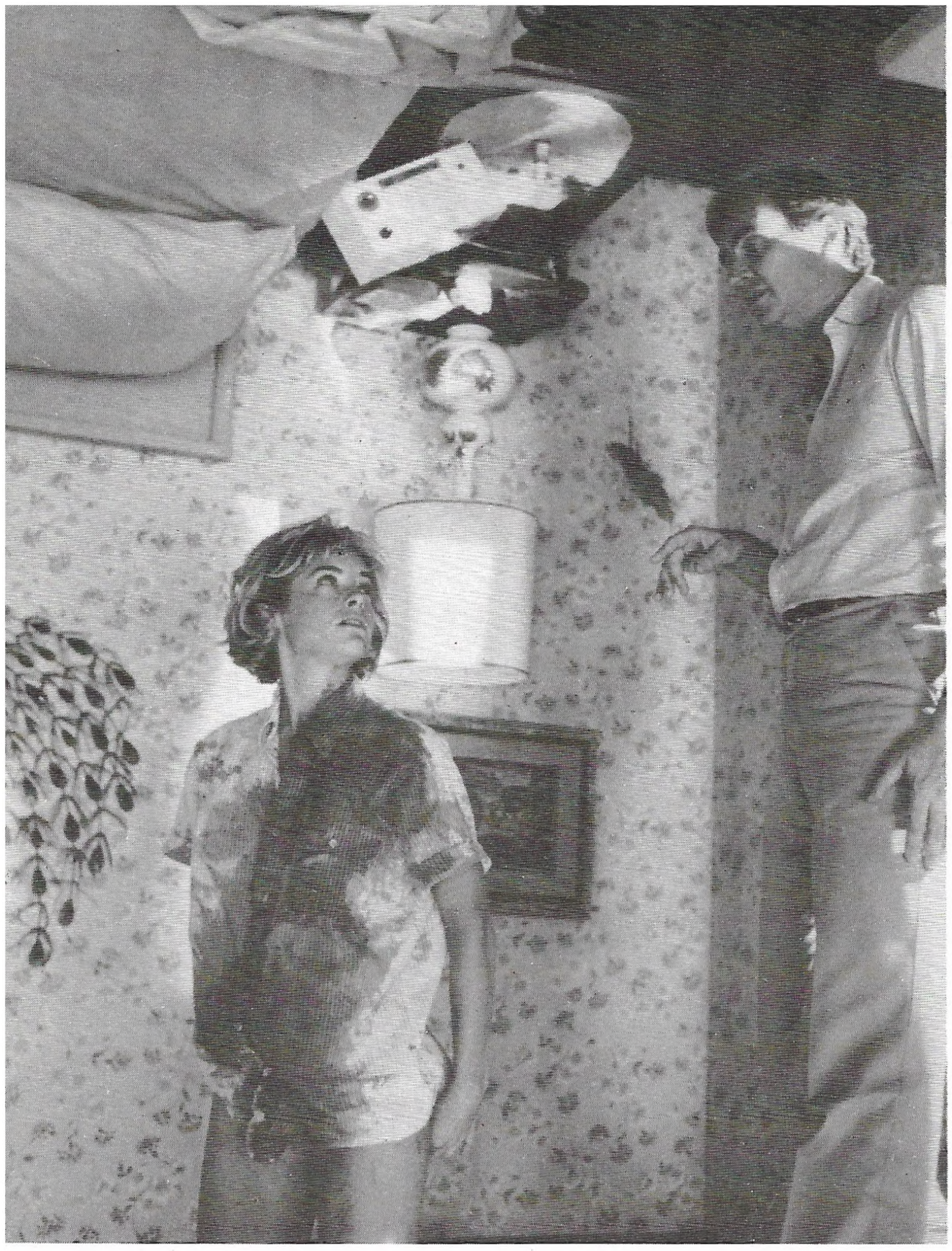
The running time of the film turned out long, which necessitated some cuts. Some expository scenes were dropped, concerning the cover-up by the parents of their vigilante slaying of child molester, Fred Krueger. "We felt that one scene we kept in the basement expressed the core of the story," said Craven. "The notion of the screenplay is that the sins of the parents are visited upon the children, but the fact that each child is not necessarily stuck with their lot is still there."

The director had wanted a 36-day shoot but had to accept the shorter time frame, which added pressure to the filming. The problems were compounded by having the character of Nancy so prevalent in the picture. "Nancy is in practically every scene," said Craven. "So we had the problem of just plain exhaustion with her. Heather Langenkamp turned out to be a real trouper and I sort of wore her down to the nub during the course of filming."

It was evident from the beginning that special effects would play a large part in making the film effective. Saddled with a low budget, special effects designer Jim Doyle had to come up with pretty impressive but inexpensive stuff. A five-man crew was responsible for it all, including bottomless beds, bottomless bathtubs, elastic walls, phones that come alive and to top it off, a giant revolving room. The room was part of a 360-degree revolving structure with all the lights built in. The room was constructed specifically for NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET on a sound stage at the old Desilu studios in Hollywood, and figured prominently in two major se-

Right: Robert Englund as boogeyman Fred Krueger in makeup by David Miller. Below Left: Heroine Heather Langenkamp takes an unpleasant phone call from Krueger in one of the film's imaginative dream sequences. Below Right: Director Wes Craven choreographs Langenkamp's action-packed showdown with the boogeyman.





Craven directs Amanda Wyss on the ceiling of one of the film's revolving room sets, as she gets knifed and plastered all over her bedroom by an invisible boogeyman. On a different revolving set (right) a bloody torrent erupts after a victim is swallowed by his bed. Craven shot the film, elaborate effects and all, for under $2 million.

quences.

"Some of the effects shots were in the original script, but others were introduced by Doyle and his crew," said Craven. "Some effects, like the fountain of blood, originally were conceived as following the normal laws of gravity—flowing over the bed and onto the floor in this case—but then our special effects man proposed the idea of using the revolving room. Doyle thought that the fountain could come straight up in the air and across the ceiling. We went with his suggestion and he delivered."

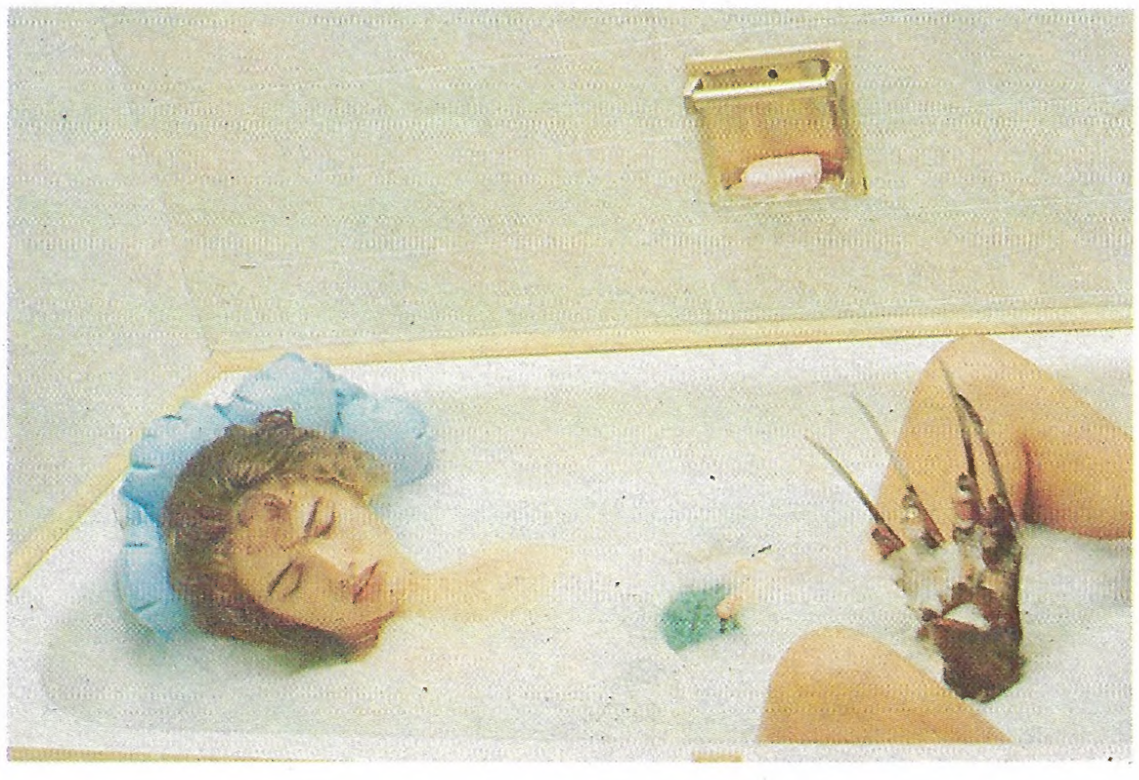
But things don't always work as planned. The director and cameraman were strapped into chairs attached to the rotating structure and left hanging upside down for about a half hour while 250 gallons of colored water were poured through the bed on the bottom of the floor, now resting at the top of the set. The idea was to have the room rotate slowly in such a way that the blood would flow down the wall away from the camera, providing a very strange and surreal image. What happened shocked everybody on the set.

"The weight of the fluid was so great that the room began to tip the other way and the water immediately rushed in that direction," said Craven. "The whole room just went spinning out of control like a giant carnival ride with fluid flying every which way. The cameras were drenched and we were almost killed. All the lights shorted out. By the time they got us down we were soaked."

One of the film's most impressive visuals is when Krueger walks through the cell bars in the local police station to get at Rod, a rotoscoped optical effect. In order to maintain the integrity of the shot the cell bars were filmed with a locked down camera. "We took triangulations of the camera so we knew exactly the height of it from the floor and the angle towards the point where the killer was going to walk through," Craven explained.

Weeks later the insert shot of Robert Englund was filmed on a bare stage using traditional blue screen. "We put the camera again at the exact height and angle we had used before and walked the actor through that space. Then those two images were married and a rotoscope artist went through and matted out the bars so it appeared they were going straight through his body."

Langenkamp falls asleep in her bath and comes under attack by the dream killer.



Originality and intelligence are the keynotes, according to Craven, for a successful film. "You have to give the audience something they haven't seen before, haven't thought of before or characters they can't get out of their minds. It's as simple and as complex as that. You don't want to sit down and say 'here's a formula, let's make a picture.'

"That was done, incidentally, by the writers of DEADLY BLESSING," continued Craven. "They thought they'd take CHARLIE'S ANGELS and put them out in Stephen King territory. They took all these elements from hit films and tried to put them all together in this kind of Frankenstein-like film and it didn't work. You've got to come up with your own seed and grow your own tree. If you take a branch from here and a root from there you'll end up with this hideous, strange film that nobody wants to see."

The filmmaker is proud of his latest picture. "I think it's my best," he said. "It's very unusual, very intense and it's not anything I would be ashamed to have anybody look at."

Coming up for Craven is a writer-director spot on an episode of the new TWILIGHT ZONE television show which he says is due later this fall. □

REVIEW

Any way you slice it, Wes Craven's horror exercise turns out to be a brilliant study in audience manipulation

A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET

A New Line Cinema release. 11/84, 91 mins. In color. Written and directed by Wes Craven. Producer, Robert Shaye. Co-producer, Sara Risher. Executive producers, Stanley Dudelson and Joseph Wolf. Director of photography, Jacques Haitkin, Producton designer, Greg Fonesca, Mechanical special effects designer, Jim Doyle. Music by Charles Bernstein.

Lt. Thompson ..... John Saxon
Marge Thompson ..... Ronee Blakeley
Nancy Thompson ..... Heather Langenkamp
Tina Grey ..... Amanda Wyss
Rod Lane ..... Nick Corri
Glen Lantz ..... Johnny Depp
Dr. King ..... Charles Fleischer

by Kyle Counts

Director Wes Craven has mellowed since the days of LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT, which featured a castration, a dispatching by chainsaw (before it became fashionable) and a female victim having a loop of her intestines pulled out. NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET, which he also wrote and directed, has its share of gore and violence, but it's significantly less brutal and angry than his 1972 drive-in classic.

And, for those who care, NIGHTMARE is a much better product than his last two films: the slush-brained DEADLY BLESSING and the better-forgotten SWAMP THING. In NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET, Craven gets back to basics, doing what he does best: working over the audience's primal fears and extracting the kind of cathartic screams usually reserved for death-defying rides at amusement parks.

While NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET is an effective shrieker, it is more noteworthy as an example of shrewd calculation. It combines the slasher movie with the type of fanciful special effects found in larger-scale movies (the film's total budget was under $2 million) and lays the mixture over the framework of a psychological thriller. Any way you slice it, it's a brilliant study in manipulation.

The film proceeds from the simple concept that the sound of someone scraping their fingernails on a chalkboard can put goosebumps on even the most steel-nerved moviegoer. So, in this film, our "monster" (Robert Englund, in a familiar-looking David Miller make-up) fashions a glove, fitted with razor-sharp finger knives, and announces his arrival by scraping them over steel surfaces to produce a squealing sound that neatly sets the stage for the scare stuff to come.

Craven knows just how to push his audience's buttons: he preys on our childhood feelings of vulnerability that come with turning out the bedroom light (our protagonists are murdered while sleeping); the bad dreams that are part of every adolescent's subconscious; our fears of drowning; of being attacked in our own homes, in our very beds; and uses school—a source of anxiety for children of all ages—as a location for some of the stalk and slash sequences.

Ronee Blakley as Langenkamp's alcoholic mom, revealing film's dark secret.

The hook of NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET is that a group of surburban teen-agers (yes, again) discovers that each of them has had the same dream about a disfigured crazy who seems bent on ripping them to shreds. And, in the Agatha Christie tradition, the dreams become reality, claiming the kids one by one. A girl is slashed open before her boyfriend's eyes (and forced to do a wall-crawl ala JoBeth Williams in POLTERGEIST), the boyfriend is strangled in his jail cell while awaiting arraignment for her unexplained death, and another boy is literally swallowed by his bed, releasing a torrent of blood and guts that give his room a decidedly repugnant new decor.

Through it all, spunky Nancy (Heather Langenkamp) is determined not to be another teenage statistic ("I'm into survival," she tells her boyfriend). Predictably unable to get support from her parents (Ronee Blakely and John Saxon) she watches old movies into the wee hours of the night, pops generic No-Doze-like breath mints, and guzzles gallons of coffee to prevent herself from succumbing to a fatal sleep. (In one droll moment, she pretends to be asleep when her mother checks in on her, then springs out of bed and pulls out a Mr. Coffee machine, already in the process of brewing a fresh pot.)

It isn't long before the sleepless nights take their toll ("God, I look twenty years old!" she groans to her mirror, in the funniest line of the movie year). During a quick snooze in English class, she imagines she sees her dead girlfriend, still in her plastic body bag, slithering down the hall; and while soaking in the tub (featuring a reprise of the oh-so-subtle crotch shot Craven used in DEADLY BLESSING), she is pulled down into the depths of her bathwater, narrowly escaping a watery grave.

Mom, it seems, has been hiding something from Nancy. The demon plaguing her dreams is one Fred Krueger, a real-life child molester who was hung by some vigilante parents (including Nancy's) and burned to death (thus his disfigured appearance) at their hands. He apparently has risen—using the kid's dreams as a door to the real world—to seek revenge on the offspring of his judge and jurors.

While mom hits the bottle (Blakely is hilariously bad as the gin-soaked Mrs. Thompson) and dad busies himself with police business, Nancy decides to face her tormentor head-on. You want resourceful? Watch our feisty heroine rig up a complicated series of booby traps for Freddy in a matter of minutes, then do battle with him under her own roof—now a veritable prison, since mom added the bars over the windows for "security" (there is no such thing, Craven reminds us).

Aside from a fizzled climax and a silly 'twist' ending (Blakely watches all the kids—alive again—drive off in a car that suddenly seems to take them hostage while she is pulled through a window pane by guess who?), NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET is an effective little scare piece that does well in sustaining its creepy mood. The kids perform admirably for amateurs, there are some humorous moments ("You don't need a stretcher, you need a mop," a cop tells a paramedic who has arrived at the home of the boy swallowed by his bed) and Craven has infused his unremarkable storyline with a number of adroit visual touches (Krueger's tongue coming out of the receiver end on Nancy's phone, his arms magically elongating as he reaches out for a victim, the steps that turn into marshmallow when Nancy tries to ascend them), impressively realized by effects man Jim Doyle and staff.

At the end, there is a credit that reads, "Special Thanks to Sean Cunningham." I'm not certain just what Craven is thanking splatter king Cunningham for, but it may be a tribute to the fact that Cunningham's FRIDAY THE 13TH series—the biggest moneymaker in the history of horror movies—has helped to legitimize the stalk-and-slash genre, as well as pave the way for audience acceptance of films like NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET (a sequel is already in the works). While the genre has consistently proven itself to be a low point in film history, if the films showed evidence of the inventiveness of NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET, we might not be so quick to dismiss them. □